

A 100-Year-Old-Driver Crashes into School Kids. Time to Take Grandpa's Car Keys?

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A 100-year-old driver in L.A. plows into a group of schoolchildren, raising the question: When should the elderly stop driving? Jamie Reno reports.



A 100-year-old driver in South Central Los Angeles allegedly backed his Cadillac into a group of children leaving Main Street Elementary School Wednesday, injuring 11 kids and three adults. After the incident, the driver, Preston Carter, who is cooperating with police and wasn't injured, told KCAL-TV in Los Angeles, "My brakes failed. It was out of control." Meanwhile, Carter's 78-year-old daughter Ella Fleming said that her father would not be driving anymore. "I'm so sorry that it happened," she told the Los Angeles Times, "and I'm thanking God none of them died." The tragedy, which follows a somewhat similar incident several years ago in which an 86-year-old man plowed through a farmers market in nearby

Santa Monica, killing 10 people and injuring 63, raises the questions: Are senior drivers an increasing menace on our roads? And when should we take away grandpa's and grandma's car keys?

In the early 2000s, the Insurance Institute For Highway Safety (IIHS), a non-profit safety research group whose mission is finding ways to reduce automobile crashes, initiated a study that looked at the trend of senior drivers and crashes over time.

"The researchers in that study predicted that as baby boomers aged, the older driver crash problem would be more acute," explains Russ Rader, a spokesman for IIHS. But in a follow-up study completed more recently, Rader says the institute was "surprised to discover that older driver fatal crash involvement has declined sharply in the last decade."

Rader notes that one study found that, per licensed driver, those 75 and older kill fewer pedestrians, bicyclists, motorcyclists, and occupants in other vehicles, as compared with drivers ages 30-59.

Preston Carter, left, 100, talks with police officers after his car went onto a sidewalk with a group of parents and children outside a South Los Angeles elementary school on Aug. 29, 2012, in Los Angeles, California. (Mark J. Terrill / AP Photo)

Rader says one of the reasons for this is that older drivers are likely healthier and more alert today than they were 20 to 25 years ago. "An 80-year-old today is typically in better shape than an 80-year-old was 25 years ago," he says.

As for the incident in Los Angeles this week, Rader says, "It's tragic when this happens, especially when there are children involved. But while older drivers are often demonized, statistics do not show that they are a particular menace to our society. They do have higher crash rates per mile traveled comparable to teens, but the overall picture over time shows that in terms of serious crashes, things are getting better." But Andy Cohen, CEO of Caring.com, a website that helps adult children deal with their aging parents, says that while the numbers supplied by IIHS are accurate, "they're a bit misleading."

Cohen says it's true that accidents per driver have gone down among seniors, "but when you multiply that by the growing population of seniors, it gets much higher. Their data is correct, but they're not demographers. The population of 80-year-olds is exploding. We've done research on this as well. The rapid growth of this population trumps the fact that they may be healthier and better drivers. Roads overall are not safer."

Caring.com, which has two million visitors a month, has a section devoted to the issue of senior drivers. Cohen says it's "the most heavily trafficked and emotionally difficult part of our entire website. That's why

we offer tips and tools for adult children of seniors about how to have that discussion of taking their car keys away. Many visitors on our site say this issue is harder to talk about than planning their funerals.” Cohen says the accident in Los Angeles on Wednesday was “horrible. This poor guy clearly should not be driving. I fear that we will be seeing more of these kinds of tragedies, because the fact is there are an ever-increasing number of senior drivers.”

Most everyone interviewed for this story agreed that there are times when seniors should not be allowed to drive any more. But making the decision to take the car keys from a parent or grandparent is never an easy one.

Tawni Plath, 47, a computer consultant from Des Moines, Iowa, says it was “very, very hard” to convince her ailing mother to stop driving. “My mom has Alzheimer’s, and then she got cataracts and wasn’t able to drive for six weeks. My dad did the driving for a while, but we never took her keys and she started driving again,” says Plath. “It took us a year to convince her it was not safe for her to drive. We would say, ‘Mom, you’re going to hurt someone else.’ She threw fits, she cried, but we finally convinced her to give my daughter her car. Knowing that the car went to her granddaughter really helped, it made it a little easier. She gets rides now from all of us.”

Nancy Thompson, a spokesperson for AARP (American Association of Retired Persons), says that the baby boom generation grew up in cars, and 9 out of 10 of them want to stay where they are for as long as possible.

“Boomers are turning our suburbs gray, and for so many of them driving is a huge part of their identity and their independence,” she says. “For many seniors, driving represents the difference between isolation and the frailty spiral.” When you take away a person’s car keys, Thompson says, it can often lead to depression. “This can then lead to inactivity, which can lead to frailty, then to ill health,” she says. “It’s a spiral.”

AARP’s “We Need to Talk” seminar, created by The Hartford insurance group and MIT AgeLab, addresses the subject and includes tips on choosing the right time to have the conversation. AARP also provides tips on when it’s time for seniors to limit or stop driving, which include almost crashing or having “close calls”; getting lost, especially in familiar locations; having trouble seeing or following traffic signals, road signs, and pavement markings; and responding more slowly to unexpected situations or having trouble moving the foot from the gas to the brake pedal.

Thompson says the real issue is the need for more alternative ways for seniors to get around. Making the transition from driver to non-driver is a difficult one that Thompson thinks society could and should make easier.

“When seniors stop driving, they become passengers, and after that they walk. There needs to be something between asking a loved one or friend to drive you somewhere and walking there yourself,” she says. “Society can’t expect public transportation to be an option for most people in their 70s, 80s or 90s. For many it’s inconvenient, or it doesn’t go where they want to go, or it isn’t available at all, or they haven’t done it before, or it’s just more of a challenge than many older people are likely to take on.”